Grand Challenges Immigrant Stories Project

A current summary and reflection

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ABSTRACT: *The research team for the Grand Challenges Immigrant Stories Project is currently developing coding and assessment methods for meaningfully analyzing the narrative content of digital video immigrant stories submitted to the University of Minnesota Immigration History Research Center's public online collection. This article discusses early preparations for the project, current and future directions, and questions to consider as research continues in the cross-disciplinary areas of narrative psychology and immigration adjustment.*

SUMMARY

The Immigrant Stories Project (also known as Voicing the Global Immigration Crisis) is part of an ongoing Grand Challenges research grant focused on understanding and describing what factors may help immigrants and refugees adjust to another culture in a healthy way – particularly factors involved in telling one's story to convey something personally meaningful. Previous narrative psychology studies indicate that telling one's story can help with emotional outcomes, well-being, and an increase in resilience for both children and adults. With this general research in mind at the beginning of the project, our team initially worked together to learn how to code event narratives (that is, stories about a single event) that were significant in people's lives and raised awareness of ethnic identity issues in the narrator(s).

Next we began the process of applying this knowledge to the life stories, journey stories, and other narratives recorded for posterity on the University of Minnesota's Immigrant Stories website (immigrantstories.umn.edu). The stories included in the project are all told by people who specifically have immigrated, or have had an ancestor immigrate, to the United States from many other countries around the world. As the project continues, it is worthwhile to consider current directions and also to point out

that we must not only pay close attention to the individuals' experiences as expressed in narrative form, but also attempt to identify and name larger global and regional narratives that might be influencing how these individuals imagine and think about the United States.

Our team spent the first section of the spring semester delving into the literature surrounding ethnicity- and identity-based narratives. Thereafter, we focused on becoming reliable coders for event narratives that informed racial awareness on the part of the storytellers. We spent a significant amount of time talking about appropriate coding schemes and the best quantitative and qualitative methods for meaningfully assessing a collection of personal, individual stories. At the end of the spring term, we began to discuss criteria for how to assess the content of the videos in the Immigrant Stories online archive and how we can best conduct form and content analysis on this publicly available data.

In the weeks following, we have been moving toward a broader and deeper understanding of which coding system(s) can help us to understand some of the common narrative threads present in the stories of people who perceive themselves to have had "successful" immigration experiences. To this end, we are developing a coding manual that will assess story types, story forms, and genres of the told stories – as well as aspects of narrative processing present in the stories such as evidence of coherence, emotionality, meaning making, and autobiographical reasoning about the self. One of the important questions we are considering is: What helps people develop a sense of self-continuity throughout their lives, especially considering this major turning point in the life story – the move to a new country?

CASE STUDIES

To pinpoint the presence of the narrative elements mentioned above, it will be helpful to examine excerpts from a few of the recorded narratives on the Immigrant Stories Project website and briefly explore how they compare to and contrast with each other in terms of narrative components, form, and genre.

Transcripts from each video narrative were provided on the website, which have been corrected for accuracy in the case of discrepancies.

Hyunjin, South Korea

Hyunjin begins his narrative with a short explanation of various places he has lived before moving to the U.S. to study at the University of Minnesota. One phrase that stands out is a telling list of items he brought with him: "When I came to America I brought things that I needed, like clothes, food, utensils, my passport, along with my American dream." This statement may indicate the presence of a *master narrative* the author has internalized about the United States (McLean & Syed, 2015). The concept of the "American dream" represents the master narrative that, once in the United States, one will receive greater freedom to pursue individual and economic success and happiness (McAdams, 2013).

Also, while it is low on emotion language, Hyunjin's story is still clearly hopeful and *progressive*, rather than stable or regressive (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). That is, the storyteller considers how he has grown and will grow in the future, rather than evaluating himself in the story as an unchanging self.

> My dad told me when he gave me this wallet that when I grow up, graduate, and get a good job someday, I should get him a new and better wallet. And I guess that's one of the reasons why I came here: to study hard, get a good job, so that one day I could buy him a new wallet and be a proud son.

Hyunjin has a *future self* in mind: he will be a successful, financially stable, "proud son." The wallet his father gives him is symbolic of this progressive pursuit of the future self – someday to be exchanged for a "new and better wallet" (implying a new and better self).

All in all, Hyunjin's transcript is quite short compared to many others on the Immigrant Stories website (most of which adhere to a 3-to-5-minute guideline for submission), but his story demonstrates

that narratives can be very long or very concise and still have a coherent, understandable quality along with allowing enough narrative space for the storyteller to construct meaning from past experiences.

Jean, Haiti

Another narrator, Jean from Haiti, uses a different narrative style to describe the missing person in his life – his mother. His story is quite long and full of vivid emotional language, compared to Hyunjin's. He approaches his video from a highly sensitized perspective, with vivid phrases and strong implications of emotion in his vocabulary. For example: "My mom is the most important thing I miss in life. She is like a foreign matter stuck inside of me which I feel every day." Jean also expresses his story in terms of romantic overcoming of circumstances, aided by a divine guide in the form of his mother.

> I almost grew up by myself, overcoming adversity, and facing the dangers of a wild life. ... The fact she gave me life already proved her love and patience for me. But even after her death, she makes me who I am today. One day, while I carried on my back all the problems of the world, she came to help me in my dreams.

Jean's narrative is a strong example of the process of *meaning making* – applying reflection to events in one's life in order to make sense of them after the fact (McLean & Pratt, 2006).

> Without blasphemy, if God was a woman, he would be my mother. I'm very grateful she never leaves me and even gave me a hymn to understand the valuable meaning of the struggles in life. I can always sing this song when I fall, just to get up stronger.

Unlike many of the other narratives on the Immigrant Stories website, in which meaning is often indirectly implied, Jean explicitly talks about the meaning and understanding he has gained from his past experiences.

So far, our coding has also found that a sizable number of immigrant narratives – including Jean's story – assume the narrative form of a *romance*, in which the teller's plot is "characterized by a storyline that

switches between progress and decline ... Romance protagonists overcome obstacles on the way to their goal" (Benish-Weisman, 2009). Benish-Weisman and others assert that mapping their experiences onto a romantic narrative structure may help people pursue redemptive themes and have better adjustment to the myriad narrative turns that most lives eventually take (McAdams, 2013).

John, Italy/United States

There are also cases in the story collection where the narrator is not actually an immigrant, but instead a U.S. descendant of immigrants. John is a U.S. citizen with Italian ancestors who weaves an intergenerational narrative, specifically about his "family ghosts," moving chronologically from the past to the present. This kind of format is clearly different from others' individualized narratives of the transition from their home countries to the U.S., although most of these kinds of stories still possess a clear chronological coherence. These types of family history narratives can also tend to include the most poignant or memorable anecdotes passed down through the generations, as John's narrative exemplifies.

> Grandma remarried another Andreozzi, Tony Andreozzi, a year later. And my father always thought that that was his father. And then one day, in the little Italian neighborhood that they lived, I don't know how old my father was, but someone said, "Y'know, Tony's not your father." And my father said, "What?" And then, I think it was a very – at best – unfortunate way to find out that your father is your stepfather.

We can also learn about some attitudes toward Italian immigrants during the early 1900s from a couple of John's narrative asides.

> [S]he was Vincenza Limongiello. She was born in an area called "The Hooks," a tough waterfront tenement in Buffalo, New York. She changed her name quickly to Jenny Limoncello. That went easier on American ears. "Limongiello" and "Vincenza" didn't go

so well with some people at that time.

So we see that family history stories may possess some specific kinds of historical reflections or autobiographical reasoning that reflects an awareness of changing contexts and biases surrounding immigrant groups during different time periods in the U.S. These snippets of information may help immigrants and their descendants construct *social representations of history*: bigger historical narratives that help people groups make collective sense of their experiences – which in turn may "leak out" into the personal narratives of individuals (Hilton & Liu, 2017).

Rehima, Ethiopia

A final example here examines a different kind of narrative structure. Rehima, who is a member of the Gurage people of Ethiopia, uses more of an associative narrative structure than a linear one. That is, instead of telling a story with a specific beginning, middle, and end, she includes multiple anecdotes that start with the words, "I remember..." First she recalls a list of traditional foods from her people group. She then moves on to recount a story her father told her about her aunt while his parents were negotiating a Gurage proposal ritual.

> I remember the story my father told me about his sister when she got married. In the Gurage culture, the boy's breaking the news to his parents and entreats them to request the girl's family for [her] hand, being so overjoyed. The first step is for parents of the young man to send the older to call on those of the young lady to propose a marriage. His sister very nosy. When she got married, her family asked more gift and money. ... She got angry. "Don't ask more gift and money! When I go home, maybe he don't have money. I don't want be poor." In Gurage tradition, the lady no say anything.

This anecdote serves as a nested narrative inside Rehima's larger series of anecdotes, illustrating something

specific both about Gurage culture (traditionally, women should not be outspoken during the marriage proposal process) and about her beloved relative (her aunt spoke out anyway). After this, Rehima uses a final "I remember" anecdote about her aunt to demonstrate the closeness of their personal relationship.

Since Rehima's video does not appear to follow a specific narrative arc, the coherence (that is, the understandability) of the narrative seems to be suspect – *unless* we view the narrative as more of a series of interlocked, thematically associated anecdotes rather than holding to the traditional Western narrative arc of a chronological beginning, middle, and end (Michaels, 1991). This illustrates the point that we must be very careful to consider what kinds of narratives count as coherent or incoherent, as well as what narrative contexts researchers might be embedded in when making such distinctions (McLean & Syed, 2015).

DISCUSSION

In most of the narratives being coded so far, one of the fundamental components we have been on the lookout for is the presence of *autobiographical reasoning*, the connection one makes between events and the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). This is thought by researchers to be one of the key aspects of a narrative that may help an individual develop and maintain a sense of *self-continuity* – the sense that one is a continuous, fundamentally "same" self from the past to the present and into the future (Habermas & Köber, 2014). So far, all of the narratives we have been analyzing indeed display autobiographical reasoning. This might indicate that those who choose to tell their story on a platform like this might have already previously reflected on connections between past events and the self – or they are encouraged to do so by the digital workshop guidelines, a classroom teacher, etc. when preparing to write their narratives. It is extremely complicated to parse what threads of experience and context may have informed the way that an individual tells his or her stories, and also how the awareness of certain audiences (in this case, the overwhelmingly large audience of the global Internet!) may also affect what we choose to tell or to leave out

(McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007).

Since this project is part of an ongoing Grand Challenges grant, research is still continuing. We are following the principle of observation as an inductive path to greater understanding, instead of proposing a specific quantification-based hypothesis at the outset. The stated goal of the project as a whole, as expressed by principal investigator Moin Syed, is to "study the politics of immigration within national and global contexts and to better document, understand and improve immigrant adaptation." Of course, like most policy-related and social-science-oriented projects, this one cannot be adequately conducted and described in only one semester's time, which is why our research continues.

The approach our team has chosen to take toward this project requires us to thoughtfully take into account ways in which many types of factors might influence the psychological health and storytelling quality or type of an immigrant or displaced person. For example, one contextual framework we must recognize as an influence on people's stories is Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development, which urges people to consider the many different contexts within which a person grows, such as the relationships and dynamic processes within and between family, school, work and societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Another relevant contextual framework has to do with the types of narratives that are most valued in a given cultural context. For example, one of the primary master narratives of the United States is thought to be the *redemptive narrative*, where a person overcomes obstacles to succeed or attain some kind of growth in his or her life (McAdams, 2013).

Knowing these, a few relevant questions for consideration are: To what extent might an immigrant adopt or reject American master narratives of redemption (e.g. the concept of the American Dream) in order to proceed with immigration adjustment? Do immigrants who develop bicultural identities (retaining aspects of their ethnic identity while also gaining some aspects of American identity) and who pursue integration into U.S. society, rather than complete assimilation or separation, also tell certain kinds of

immigration stories? (Berry, 2005) These are just a couple of angles from which we can approach the depth and richness of the narratives that the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota has collected in the last several years. Examining these stories – and their broader contextual frameworks – to develop useful systems and methods to tell us something about how immigrants adjust to a new culture is, of course, a primary ongoing research goal.

An important aspect of any interdisciplinary project like this one is having the resources to draw from multiple subfields of psychology and other disciplines. Our team specifically has collective experience and education in developmental psychology, counseling psychology, public health, journalism, and the humanities. We have deemed it purposeful and necessary to draw upon these multifaceted background areas of interest while developing the methodologies that will be the most appropriate for analyzing the narrative data gathered, including both quantitative and qualitative measures. The extent to which we must carefully train, ask many questions, and deep-sea dive into a multidisciplinary selection of research literature – long before jumping right into the coding process – has been a timely personal reminder to always pursue both rigor and wisdom in any future research endeavors.

Moreover, the general process of carefully developing appropriate sets of mixed methods to assess these kinds of social science questions has been a relatively new (and little-studied) area of interest in itself. The uses of storytelling are already being measured in the areas of medical research and child development, and narrative therapy research is by now well known within clinical psychology. But the role(s) of storytelling and its measurable effectiveness has just barely been applied to the research area of immigration adaptation. Using narrative psychology methods to engage with the available data so far seems that it will be fruitful as our study continues. Possibilities for the Immigrant Stories Project – and others like it – are very intriguing. There is much to be gained from studying the intersection of storytelling, psychology, and immigration adjustment now and into the future.

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